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ABSTRACT

This paper presents student research from a class project on the Life and Literature of Foreign-Born Women in California. It examines the role of these women in agriculture, the arts, and political and economic life. Specific accounts of women from Russia, Poland, France, and Mexico are given. Others mentioned include those women born in America but with vast cultural disparity, the Black Creoles from Louisiana and the Native American. The researcher concludes that each women is an individual who has been shaped by her cultural tradition. Those women with the strongest or most content personalities are those who have maintained a cultural link with tradition. It is suggested that these women can serve to teach others from their experiences. (MA)

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Strangers in Paradise:
The Life and Literature of Foreign-Born Women in California
[A report on student research in a class participating in the MLA project, "Teaching Women's Literature from a Regional Perspective]

There have been successive waves of immigration from north, east, south, and west to the cosmopolitan centers of San Francisco and Los Angeles since the late nineteenth century, and they continue unabated. The ethnic diversity of these cities is readily apparent to the most casual visitor, since both have foreign "quarters" and the food served in their restaurants is available to all. But the full extent to which cultural integrity has been preserved by groups whose language has set them apart and allowed them to remain so is best perceived in what foreign-born women can tell us, in their writing and their reminiscences, about their experience in the promised land. Rapid assimilation was often forced upon the men, as well as on women who were heads of households, since they had to compete in the job market to survive. Women who remained at home, for whom education involved an extravagant expenditure of time which few could afford, could remain in closer touch with the past, and were often instrumental in maintaining family and communal tradition. When necessity or affluence required their interaction with the dominant culture, the resulting inner conflict may have been repressed, but it is remembered; it affected their children; and it sometimes found expression in writing. Thus it seemed appropriate for our class, which is offered in

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the Department of Foreign Languages, to seek to understand the experience of women from widely divergent backgrounds by exploring these repositories they have created: we have read their letters, journals, stories, and poems ; we have traced patterns of women's behavior in their families; we have spoken to them at length and compiled oral histories. But what is uniquely regional in all this? What conditions of life in California may have rendered the situation of foreign-born women different from what it would have been on the equally cosmopolitan east coast?

Since there was no "extablishment" in early California, women, and women from every social class, had contributed in many important ways to the creation of the new society. Their influence extended beyond the sphere of civilizing activity to the arts and political and economic life. Because of the great need for the approved kinds of women's work it was valued here; social need and freedom enabled women to enter fields once closed to them as well. The importance of women in agriculture was considerable. The tradition of active participation in the life of the community, the greater openness of society, the inroads made by their predecessors into male domains opened new possibilities to women who had come to California from other countries. But when coupled with the insulation of ethnic neighborhoods, and the isolation of farming communities, a dynamic situation arose which led to a wide range of individual experiences. The conflict between past culture and a new dominant culture was not limited to the immigrant woman with a language which allowed or compelled her to retain a separate cultural identity. We learned through

student research that American white protestant women who left a well-established pattern of existence in another part of the country for the dream of a better life in fertile California felt the erosion of traditional values very keenly; and that Chicana, Native American, and French-speaking Black Creole women feel that theirs is an alien culture. The examples I've chosen to describe here are representative of the solutions developed by women of different nationalities to the problems of existence in the new land during different historical periods, and also of the variety of research techniques developed by students in our class.

Family wineries have been a notable feature of the local landscape and economy. Winemaking families in our regional have traditionally been French, Italian, German or Swiss, with one striking exception, the Irish Concannons. In tracing the dual pattern of the lives of the women of the Concannon family from 1874 to the present, we see both the essentially supportive role of wives in the family winery, and the resolute independence of daughters, whose exclusion from the business gave them a freedom of self-definition which the sons did not enjoy. We also learn of a woman's power to overcome the disdain of longer established Irish for the newly arrived Italians, and create harmony out of conflict. Complementing the Concannon tradition is the experience of two women of different generations: Isabel Simi Hague has been active in the wine industry for this entire century; Martha Griffin, working in farming, marketing, and public relations, was instrumental in starting a newer winery. Informants were referred to the student researcher by the instructor, a colleague in geography,

and people active in the field.

A student with a strong background in history and some knowledge of Russian, who is particularly interested in women's role during the 1917 Revolution, has been exploring the acculturation of anti-Soviet émigrés, most of whom came to northern California from China. Her research has centered in the aging conservative community of Russians living in Santa Rosa, a small city in largely rural Sonoma County. Through extensive oral interviews with 85 year old Natalia, she has learned a great deal about lives whose focal point is the church, and in which there is minimal contact with the non-Russian world. These people have recreated Russian life in the cities and small towns of northern California and reject any ties to present day USSR; they are, in an unexpected way, wholly American, and have broken with the unacceptable part of the past. Masha, a woman in her thirties born in China to Russian émigré parents, came to California when she was ten, and seems totally assimilated;but her Russian is still fluent, and her devoted concern for older women in the community make her a bridge between two cultures, and provided my student with an entrée into the closed community of the aged. Masha's aunt, a Russian poet living in a more isolated community, was more strongly marked by the experience of emigration, and has reflected upon it. My student is complementing these oral history interviews and participation in the activities of the Russian community with background reading and the study of two archival sources, biographical narratives written in the 1920's which are preserved in Stanford's Hoover Institution.

The experience of Russian and Polish Jews is completely different from that of the White Russian émigrés. Many Jews gravitated to the large cities; the aged grandmother of one of the students has written short stories and a memoir recounting her experiences, and the partial fulfillment of her dreams: to be educated, to become totally accepted by her new country, to live in a green and pleasant place. Frances Mahler had two years of schooling before poverty forced her to return to work at thirteen; but she learned quickly and well, and saw to it that her children were given the chance she yearned for; the flowers and fields of Los Angeles, ca. 1917, was paradise—though she lived to see it deteriorate into a city on an ugly human scale. Before talking with Frances about what she had written, and what she had known, my student did extensive background reading, and formulated questions which seemed crucial to her. She then found herself wanting to draw certain information from her grandmother: "but it was my story that I was wanting, not hers." After eighty years of hard work, passivity, and acceptance of the roles created for her by others, Frances was "born again" in a home for the aged where she has taken an active part in changing conditions for the better. My student has had to learn to listen, and to hear, and to abandon most of her plans to guide and shape the raw material given her. Our class is agreed that learning sensitive, alert passivity, learning to listen and to hear, has been one of the most important and the most difficult skills they have had to acquire, a skill which students (who must always be prepared with a quick response) are not encouraged to cultivate.

Like Frances, Miriam, who came to the United States from Poland at thirteen, abandoned the Yiddish of her family when she left home to make her own life at seventeen. But in 1940 she came to Cotati, where our college is now located, and joined a Jewish community of Yiddish-speaking, socialist farmers who sang, read, and worked together. The chicken farming communities of Petaluma and Cotati are no longer active, and Miriam feels that Yiddish will soon die out. The student who has been interviewing her has received a very different viewpoint from another Miriam, a university-educated woman living in Berkeley who was also raised in a Yiddish-speaking tradition and has a strong feeling for "her people" and the Yiddish language. My student is not herself Jewish. Her Berkeley informant is an old friend, whose background she had not explored before; her Cotati contact was suggested by another student who lives on the land. She has been reading widely; she feels her lack of experience and knowledge of Jewish culture puts her at a disadvantage, but she does not face the problems which personal involvement in the drama of assimilation pose for Frances' grandaughter.

There are two very different groups of French-speaking women in our region: "the French colony," consisting of French people who have settled here permanently, and the descendants of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century French immigrants; and Creole families from Louisiana and Texas, a black group which feels it has an identity quite separate from the English-speaking black community. The French have played a very large role in the cultural and economic life of San Francisco;

few people are aware of the important French presence in the small, historic town of Sonoma. A French major who resides in the town, and is interested in unearthing the true history of its people [the "official" history revolves around a legendary Hungarian baron and a prosperous Italian winemaker), has been talking with elderly French women who have recently become concerned that their story be preserved. Using the written accounts and documents which they have collected to complement oral history interviews with women from very different segments of society, she is carefully piecing together a unique aspect of women's experience and regional history.

Creole music and food are well known in the larger community, and they are singularly important aspects of their culture. But the strength of traditional custom and social organization involve far more than this, as we have learned from the oral history of an elderly Creole woman (who speaks very little English although she has lived most of her life in San Francisco), interpreted by her daughter, a member of our class, who has herself maintained much of the tradition, while transforming the traditional woman's role. Velma has been interviewing other Creole women of her own and her mother's generation, and has begun a self-study as well. She has explored all the available written sources. Archival research must be put off for a summer trip to Louisiana—but this search for self-definition has become an ongoing project; her work this year is the crucial first stage. Velma is concerned because her Creole culture is unrecognized and eroding; her project is very meaningful to her, and to her husband and children who have become involved

in it. But she understands that the need for her study is greatest in the wider community, where Creoles are "invisible."

Another perspective on Velma's experience will be found in the work of another member of the class, who has included Velma as one of seven subjects in her study of the experience of non-white minority women in Sonoma County. Her informants are women whose language and skin color are different from the dominant group: a Native American, who is a poetically eloquent spiritual and political leader in the Indian movement; a Samoan woman who is thoroughly "Americanized" with no regrets for traditional language or culture, though she retains a gregarious, communal mode of living; an elderly Japanese-American woman whose strongest identification with Japan was forced upon her during the relocation period; a frail Chinese woman who has shouldered heavy family responsibilities since childhood, has managed to maintain language and traditions for her family although she has always worked full time, and is just now thinking of setting new goals for her own education and her family's life; an Indian woman who has retained every important aspect of her traditional culture in relative isolation, although she is active in community affairs, and has reflected on the role of women in the two cultures; a Chicana who was raised in the Mexican tradition, rejected it, and has now returned, to study and to raise a family, drawing on her heritage and the lessons of her hard-won individuality. The greatest problems here arise in analyzing and preparing this wealth of material for public presentation, and in finding the words which accurately reflect the nature of alien traditions. The unifying thread which my student has found so far is this: though each of these women

is an individual (and my student has not attempted to make them conform to any kind of pre-established pattern through overly uniform questioning), all have been shaped by their cultural tradition; those who seem strongest, and most content, seem to have drawn their strength from their tradition, or to have a sense that they are firmly rooted in it. My student feels strongly that we have a great need to learn what these women can teach. She was struck by the validity of something the Native American woman said as a description of the attitude towards all of the women we have been studying in our class; I think it sums up why there is so much work for us to do: "They didn't stop to find out what we knew or what we were."